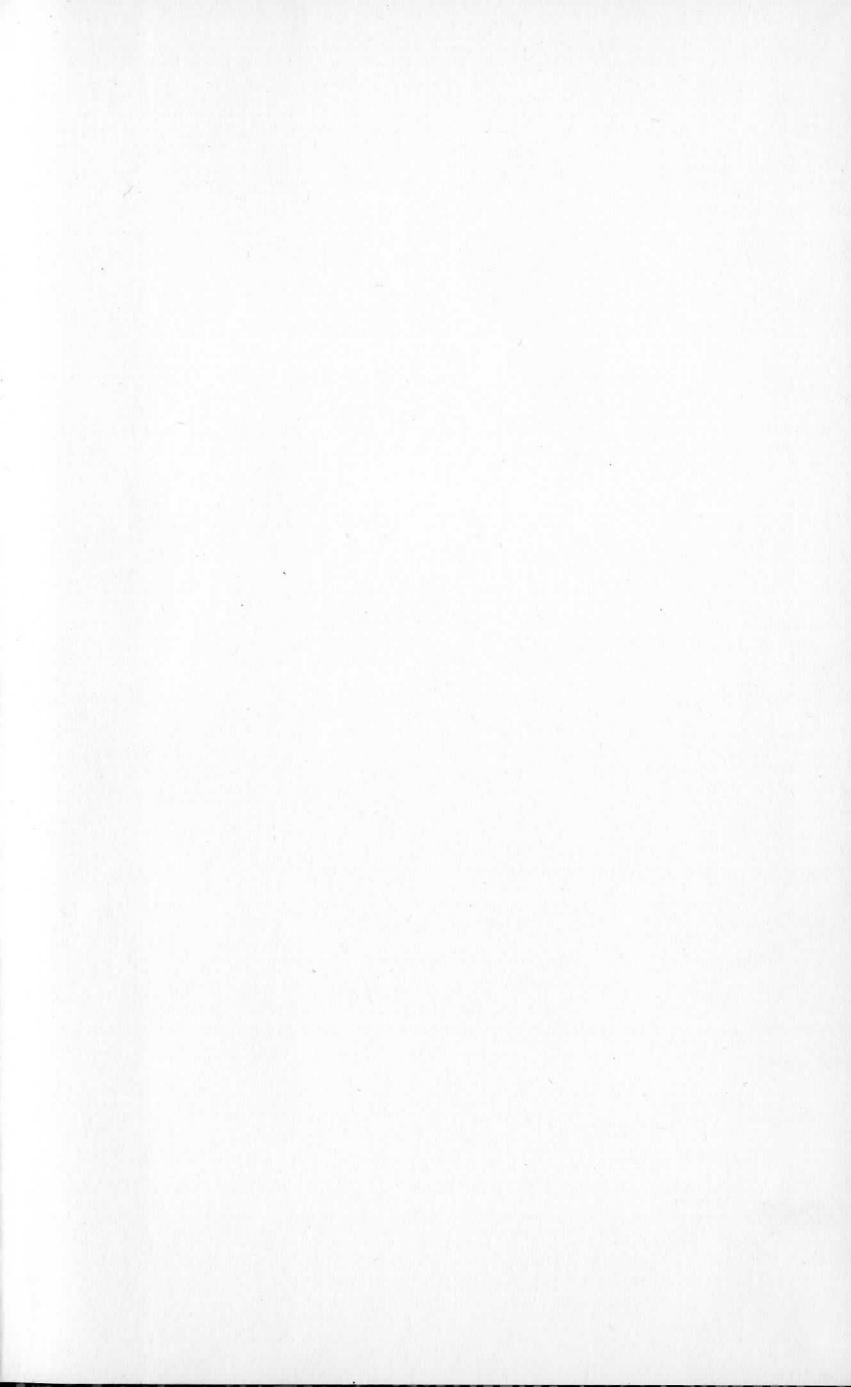
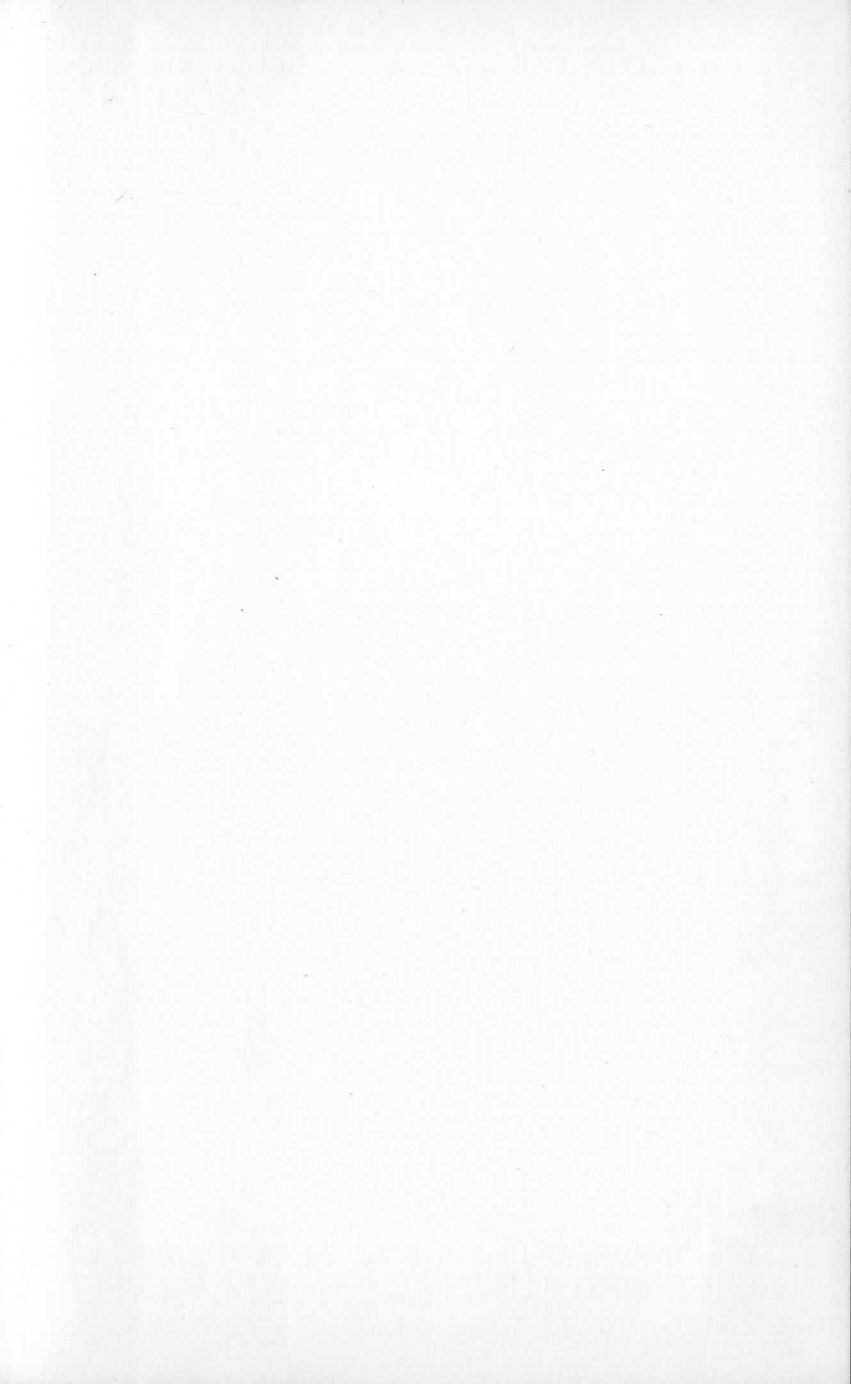
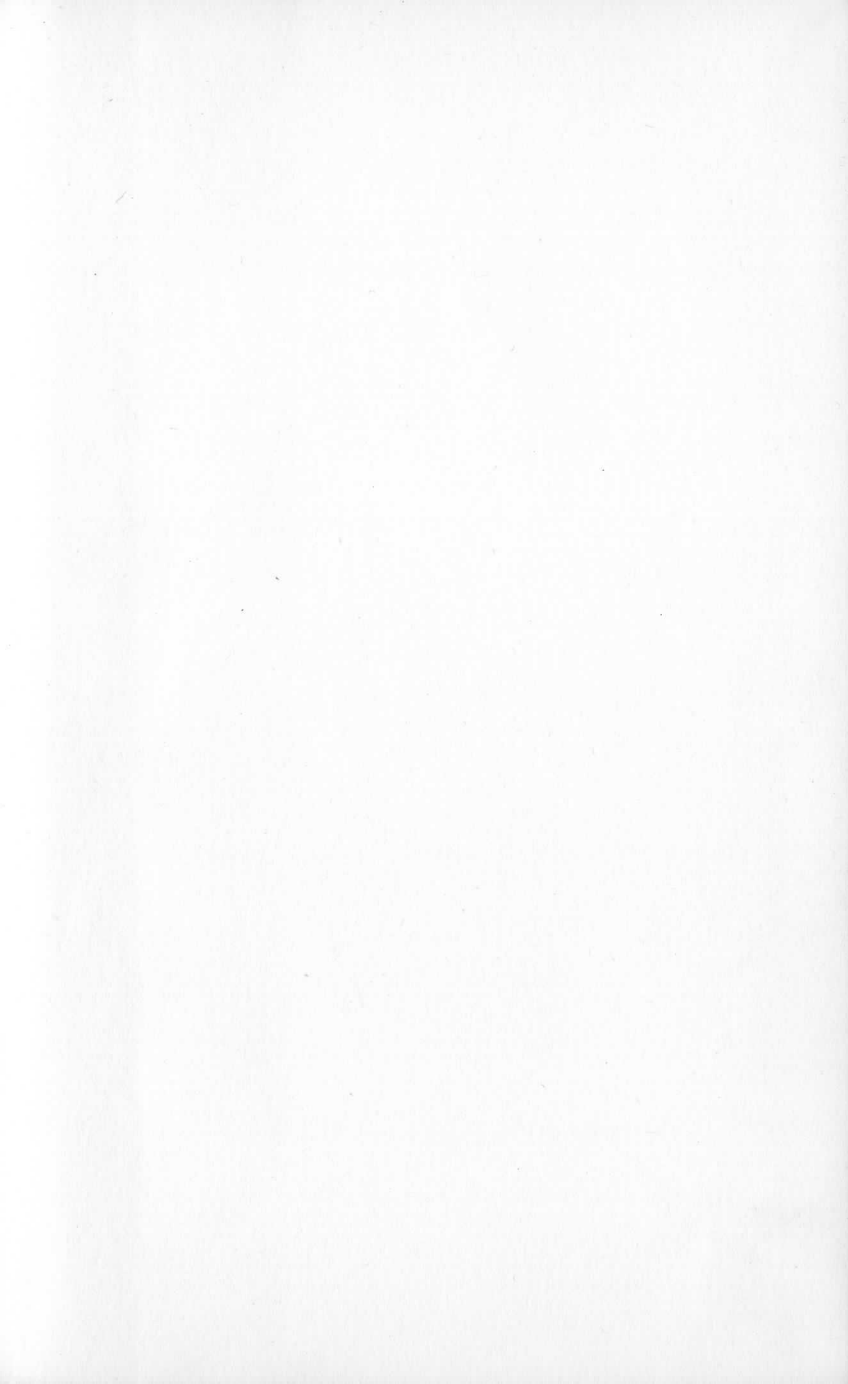
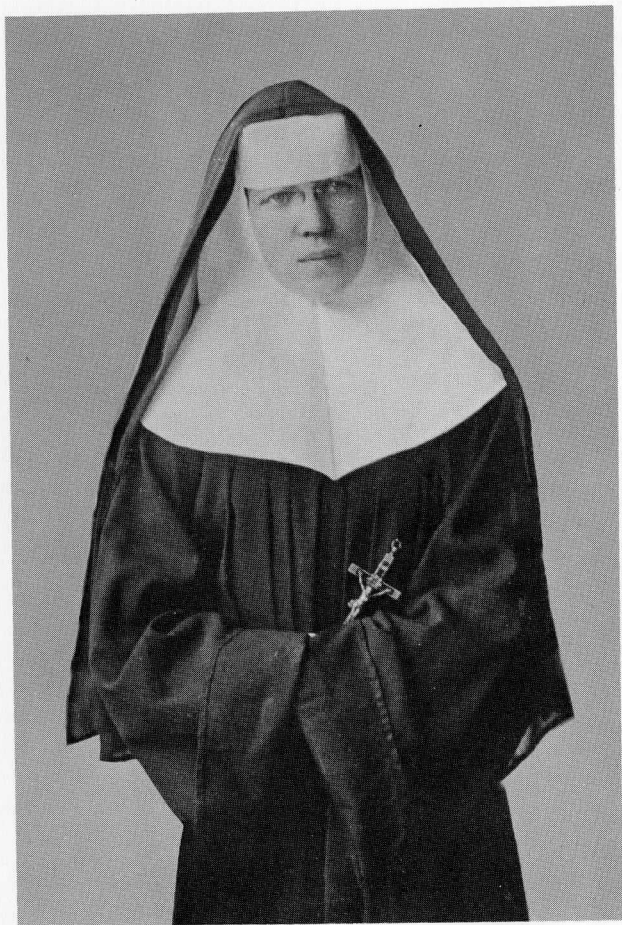


*It's Well
To Remember*









MOTHER XAVIER FITZGERALD, O.S.U.
At the Time of Her Profession in 1909

It's Well To Remember

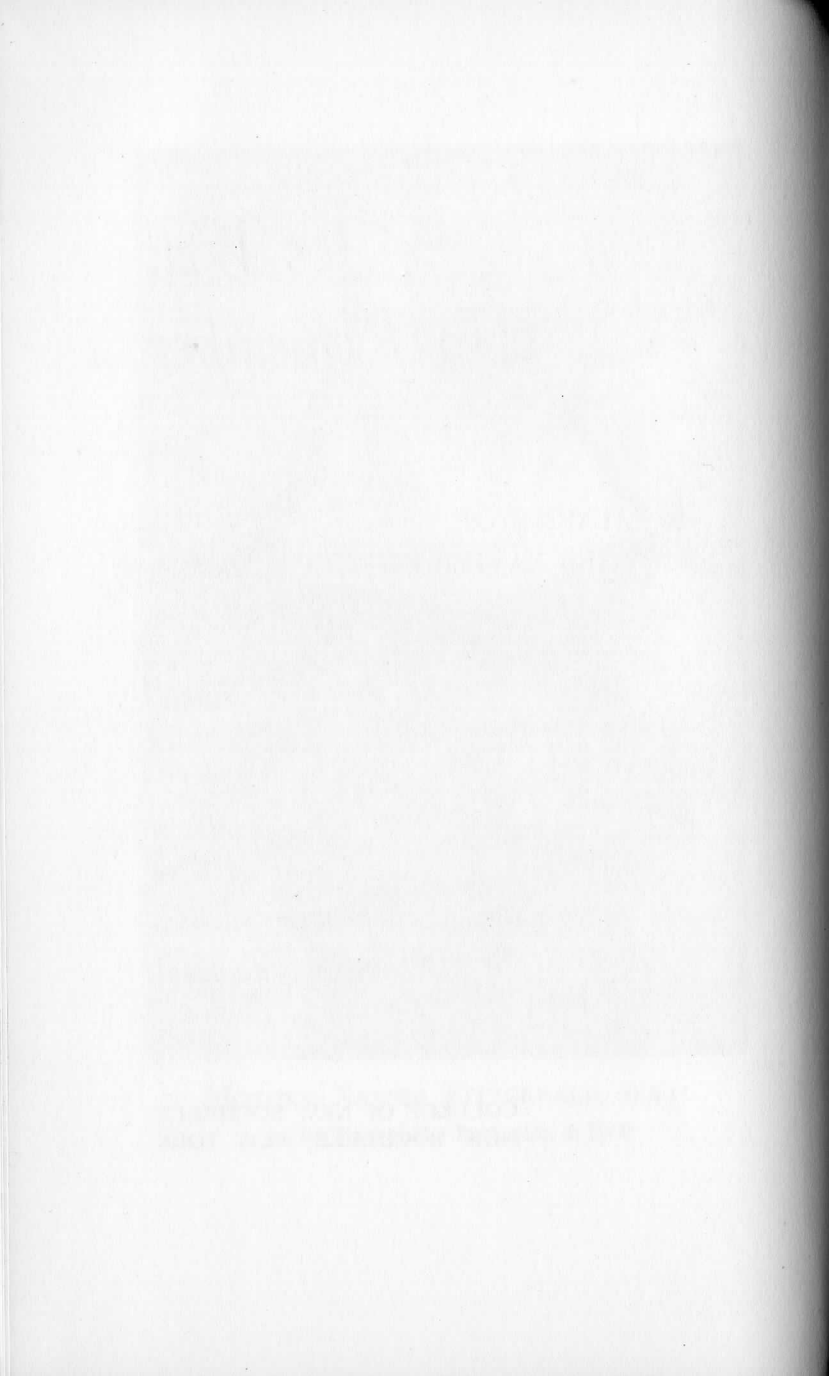
A MEMOIR OF
MOTHER XAVIER FITZGERALD, O.S.U.

by

MOTHER JUSTIN McKIERNAN, O.S.U.

Illustrated by the Author

COLLEGE OF NEW ROCHELLE
NEW ROCHELLE, NEW YORK



Foreword

THE SUNNIEST DAY is richer for the cool dark shadows that relieve it. The happiest life is stronger and deeper for the pains that furrow it. Every Christian faithful to the vocation to be another Christ, passes from sunlight to shadow, from the strength of youthful energy to the silent strength of patient endurance, before the radiant dawn of eternity breaks. The life of Mother Xavier Fitzgerald is a typical example of such Christian development and fulfillment. From youthful vigor through mature accomplishment to cheerful suffering and triumphant death, she followed the course marked out for her by God.

She was like a stream that runs for part of its course in the open sunshine, sparkling, and making a pleasant sound, providing refreshment and lending beauty to its surroundings. But afterwards it goes underground, and with little visible sign of its presence, continues silently, and in darkness. At first, its benefits are largely confined within its banks; afterwards it gives fertility to all the surrounding earth that its waters moisten. And when the harvest comes, its hidden fecundity may be measured.

The alumnae of the College of New Rochelle are Mother Xavier's harvest. Some of us, like trees

planted near running waters, were happy to have known her in that first vibrant period of her unfolding promise. Others, coming later, may never have known her intimately, but only shared in the benefits of her administrative genius. There is another group, her religious sisters, who knew her in still another way. We, too, who are also alumnae, are part of her harvest. And we have been privileged beyond the rest, for we witnessed, in the declining flow of her physical life, her emergence into eternal sunlight, and her final emptying into the ocean of God's life.

We cannot repay her for what she has given us, but we can and do rejoice to recall the memories we cherish, and we hope that we may make her live again in the imaginations of those younger alumnae, who, though part also of her harvest, had not the joy of knowing her in this life.



CHAPTER ONE

"Ireland is a lovely place!"

MOTHER XAVIER

ANYONE who knows even a little about the history of ancient place names knows what a fascinating subject it can be. Nowhere is this truer than in Ireland, where Blarney means "a little field," and Clare "a flat piece of land," where Dublin means "city of the hurdles" and Mayo "the plain of the yews." Added all together Irish place names make a little picture of the island whose natural beauties are grander and more varied than those of any comparable portion of the western world.

County Cork, only ninety miles wide, shares this rich variety, with areas of quiet farmland, and in the west, a mountainous region of wild and rugged grandeur. The river Blackwater defines its western boundary for the first six or seven miles of its rapid, rocky course, which is splendidly varied in its scenery. About a half mile to the east of the river on an elevated site, the village of Knocknagree looks down on the surrounding countryside, with many farmhouses in the foreground, and, for a background, the Kerry Mountains stretching away towards beautiful Killarney, fourteen miles to the west.

The prefix "knock," meaning mountain, appears again in the name Knockeenagullane, a townland less than two miles to the southeast, where, in the eighteen-seventies, lived Richard Fitzgerald with his young wife, Ellen, one of the Lenihans from Tureenduff. His thatch-roofed, whitewashed cottage, like those of his neighbors, was one story high with two bedrooms and a large kitchen. It was built close to the road, and sheltered from northwest winds by sycamore, ash and whitethorn trees. Beyond it lay the forty acre farm where Richard raised wheat and potatoes. The sheep that grazed in their meadows provided the wool from which Ellen made their homespun clothing, and their few acres of bogland yielded the turf that was burned in the open

hearth. Beside the river at the edge of the farm grew the flax from which she made their linen sheets. In spring its blue flowers stood tall and colored the water as blue as a summer sky.

Such was the gentle birthplace to which Mother Xavier could look back. She was the Fitzgerald's first child and always her father's favorite. Born on November 24, 1871, she was baptized the next day in the parish church of St. Joseph and named Hannah. When she was three her sister Minnie was born. Six months later their mother died. The bereaved little family struggled along somehow, until in a few years Richard Fitzgerald married Johanna Buckley, who mothered the two little girls and in time gave them three sisters, Ellie, Julia and Kate, and two brothers, Richard and Daniel. Despite Johanna's kindness, the sympathetic neighbors continued to single out Hannah and Minnie for special privileges "because they had no mother." If there was a wedding celebration in a friend's house, Hannah and Minnie were the only children permitted to come in. If a group of men were flailing wheat in someone's barn, the two little girls watched with wondering interest, but the other children were told to be on their way. Minnie was frail, and neither sympathy nor care succeeded in making her strong. But Hannah grew up to be a sturdy, lively girl, with a happy disposition and the

straightforward manner often found in country people. Alert, ambitious and eager for knowledge, she was quite ready to attend school when the time came.

The national school near her home was presided over by Mr. and Mrs. Herlihy. They were exacting teachers, but Hannah was an apt pupil, and acquired a reputation for knowing all the answers. Permutations and commutations were mastered with ease by the youthful mathematicians before they left the Herlihys' care, and a fine general foundation was the result of conscientious study and repeated drill. In this school where teachers' salaries were raised if pupils answered well in examinations, Hannah Fitzgerald may well have been a favorite pupil. "I had a great love of study," she once said, "and always wanted to have my lessons as perfect as possible, and yet I was a great tomboy. So I arranged it this way. Every day when school was over, I came home and did my lessons at once, and then I hurried to the river bank. There were many boys as well as girls there, but mostly boys, and I learned to be a tomboy. I loved to play and play hard. Minnie joined in when the game was not strenuous, and in spring we loved wading in the river right down from the house."

When the winter came, the walk to school was not always pleasant. The paths leading to the main road

were often muddy and filled with puddles during the heavy rains. The children used to walk along the fences to avoid the puddles, or cut through the fields, carrying their heavy sod of turf each day, their required quota of fuel for the schoolhouse fire. This



novel solution to the heating problem was as common a ruling in the schools of Ireland as was the prohibition to teach religion or display a crucifix. But Ireland's faith flourishes under oppression though her fortunes do not, and Hannah's family were fervent Christians despite the lack of formal instruction.

Although Richard Fitzgerald was loving to all his children, Hannah realized early that she was her father's favorite. He would do anything she sug-

gested, even when he had refused his wife. Occasionally, when they were out, they would stop at a "public house." "Now a public house," explained Mother Xavier in her precise way, "was a friendly meeting place for the countryside to discuss the happenings of the day, with a glass of porter for my father, perhaps, but never anything stronger. Father enjoyed this very much, and when my stepmother would ask him to go home, sometimes he wouldn't move. Then she would glance at me, and I'd say, 'Da, it's time to go home,' and he'd get up and go."

When Hannah was almost fifteen, the first great challenge of her life came, in an unexpected opportunity to go to America. This is how she recalled it:

"One day when I was fourteen, Cousin Mary walked into the kitchen, and she said, 'Aunt Kate's children are all grown, and I know she'd like someone for company. So I've got passage for Nance. I know she'd be the very one. It would be very nice, and the boat will sail in two weeks.' She had the tickets right in her hand. 'Now, if she does not want to go,' she said, turning to my father, 'I'll get another cousin. . . .'

"My father turned to me without a word and I said, 'I'll be delighted to go!' I thought it was a wonderful opportunity."

Her readiness to leave home and her father is

difficult to understand unless one remembers that great numbers of Irish young people were emigrating to America at that period. The sorrow of separation was being experienced in every large family, and its inevitability taken for granted, for unless they left Ireland there was no hope of gaining a livelihood. The clearheaded objectivity that characterized so many of Mother Xavier's actions in later life already showed itself in this decision, as did her impetuosity, an equally characteristic trait. Perhaps also, on this occasion, she recognized, in typical Irish fashion, the workings of Divine Providence. She said one time, "My whole life seemed to be so arranged by Him that it never seems necessary to me to wonder, surmise or puzzle—I just follow His lead."

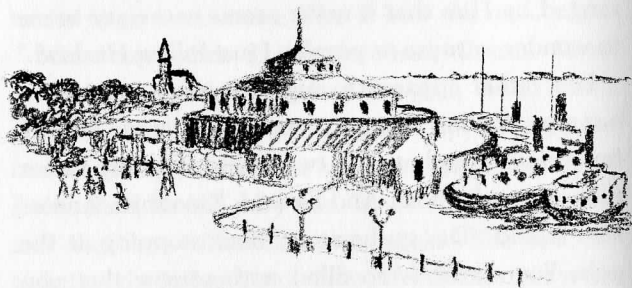
Her father apparently made no effort to stand in her way, for her account concludes, "So we got my few things together, and two weeks later my father took me to the boat. And he said, 'Goodbye, Annie.' And I said, 'Da, go home without stopping at the pub. Your heart is so filled with sorrow that you won't know when to stop.'" This time she was not to see whether her father did as she told him, for the boat pulled away from the quay, and Richard Fitzgerald went home alone.

CHAPTER TWO

"'Now living a life' depends upon ourselves and not upon circumstances."

MOTHER XAVIER

HANNAH FITZGERALD always looked forward. If the long journey across the ocean was uncomfortable and strange, and if the thought of her father's sorrow made her heart ache, she lost no time in regrets or doubts over the decision she had made. She was just fifteen, and America was the Land of Opportunity. Who could tell what the future might bring? She watched with absorbed interest as the boat made its way into the harbor at New York. The



great stream of her countrymen poured ashore at Castle Garden and divided into little pools of excited people meeting and being met. There was no one for her, but she knew just what to do. With Cousin Mary Moynehan's written directions clutched tightly in one hand and her bundles in the other, she made

her way, with the help of kindly passersby, to the crowded railroad station, and boarded the train to Albany and points north.

Hours later, weary and dusty, she alighted from the train, and found the ancient stagecoach that would carry her the rest of the way. The sight of the rolling country delighted her heart and she hardly noticed the bumping and swaying of the stagecoach as it lumbered along. Finally they reached North Creek. The tired young girl gathered her bundles once more, climbed down from the coach, and found herself at last in the kindly embrace of her Aunt Kate. Weary though she was, Hannah recognized at once in the large, strong features of the whitehaired woman, the resemblance to Aunt Nellie in Ireland, and felt herself right at home.

In a little while, the relatives and neighbors arrived to see the latest greenhorn, but not before Aunt Kate had provided her niece with a new blue dress in the latest fashion, and a widebrimmed strawberry-colored hat. With her vivid coloring and clear blue eyes Hannah passed inspection very creditably. "Why," someone exclaimed, "she doesn't look like a greenhorn at all!"

Her new life at North Creek proved a pleasant introduction to America. Far from the city, the crowds and the unscrupulous treatment to which

many immigrants were subjected, Hannah settled down contentedly in an atmosphere of friendliness, trust and family love. There was a little country school not far away and Aunt Kate wished her to continue her education. So she set out one day and entered the schoolhouse, only to find that she was bigger than anyone except the teacher. The boys and girls, sensing her embarrassment, began to laugh at her. But she was determined to make an attempt, despite her feelings. She stayed, and when the arithmetic lesson began, she quietly worked the most difficult problems with such ease that she was soon appointed to help all the slow children until the class caught up with her. After that there was no more laughing at the greenhorn.

The weeks passed quickly, and autumn turned to winter. It is easy to imagine Hannah's delight in the beautiful winter scenery of northern New York. Nature lover that she was, she had not yet seen anything to surpass the loveliness of her native land, but the severe winters of America were a new experience to her. One time, she used to recall, she walked to school through snow so deep that when she arrived the only entrance was through the window.

So the time passed in work, study and simple enjoyments. She helped Aunt Kate with the house work and when summer came, she went to a cousin's sum

mer hotel and waited on tables for many long hours. And in between times she dreamed of bringing Minnie to America. She would work hard, and save her money, and send it home to pay Minnie's passage. Then one day a letter came from Ireland, just as the first year was ending. There had been a fever, and every one in the house had had it, the children first, and last of all her father. He was the only one who had died. Years afterwards she recalled the day the message had come, "And when I got this word in Aunt Kate's house I just put my head down on the table and cried and cried. And Aunt Kate didn't know how to console me, I loved my father so much."

After the first crushing sorrow, she put aside her grief and renewed her determination to have Minnie rejoin her as soon as possible. From then on, no sacrifice would be too great or too small if it would contribute to the realization of her dream.

After some time Hannah began to wonder about the wisdom of staying on in North Creek. She had finished in the little schoolhouse. She knew that she would never be satisfied until she could learn more about all the things that interested her, and she realized that the city would offer many more opportunities for both work and study than she could find in her present surroundings. For her, to decide and then to act immediately always followed as a matter

of course. Sometimes the results were not so happy as her optimistic and impulsive outlook had anticipated, but she was never afraid to take a chance, and besides, wasn't God always there, taking care of her? So once more Hannah gathered her few belongings together, and said goodbye to her aunts and uncles and cousins in North Creek and nearby Baker's Mills. Then she set out resolutely, with her usual energy, for life in New York City.

Except for the summers, when she returned to North Creek to work in the hotel, she stayed in New York until 1903. What she found when she arrived there was an anti-Catholic, anti-Irish hostility that closed every door to advancement. The American Protective Association was in its most influential period, and anti-popery was rife. Hannah pocketed her pride and applied for domestic work. She became a nurse maid, still determined to save some money and get an education despite all obstacles. Then Minnie could come and attend school too, and all the sacrifice would seem a trifle, in view of the good to be gained. So she denied herself in everything, big and small, and sometimes the small things were harder. She once admitted how much it had cost her to forego a five cent bag of chocolate creams. "How I longed for them!" she remembered. "But I never bought them."

At last Minnie came. When the first joy of their reunion was past, Hannah noticed with anxiety how frail her sister looked, and although she longed for her company in the city, she realized that the climate of North Creek would be better for her. So they parted again, and Minnie went to stay with her hospitable relatives, while Hannah resigned herself to wait until summer to see her again. One object of her ambitions had been won, even though events had not worked out as she would have chosen. The obvious thing to do now was to seek the attainment of her second goal, the education she longed for so much.

CHAPTER THREE

"I wanted culture—I wanted everything!"

MOTHER XAVIER

THE mid-twentieth century is so accustomed to rapid progress in almost every field that it is startling to recall how recent this development is. In 1893 the horse car was the usual means of rapid transit in New York City, and progress in public school education was about as rapid. In 1895 twenty-four thousand children were refused admission to the existing high schools because of lack of room. Not until 1897 were three new schools built to remedy the situation. As late as 1893 the city could require of

girls preparing to teach, only a supplementary year in grammar school, or attendance at the Saturday "instruction in all branches of study prescribed for the several grades of certification conferred by the City Superintendent, as well as for instruction in the principles and methods of teaching. . . ." What is now Hunter College was already functioning as a four year normal college, but graduation from it was not required by the Board of Education. Probably its location far uptown and the length of time needed to complete its requirements were insuperable obstacles to many girls aspiring to teach.

Hannah Fitzgerald seems to have resumed her interrupted studies by attending one of the four public evening high schools then in operation, and by 1895 she had determined to prepare herself without further delay for the city license examination. The outcome of this decision was another step in the direction of her life's work.

There was at the time, in the parish of St. Teresa on the lower East Side, an academy conducted by the Ursuline Nuns who also taught in St. Teresa's parochial school. Founded in 1873, both schools were in a flourishing condition ten years later, when the principal of the parochial school, Mother de Pazzi, undertook a new project, that of providing training courses for Catholic teachers. In the same school

with "the academy girls" the training school students were given additional subjects intended to prepare them for the license examination after two years' study. How great the need was for such a program became immediately evident. It was so successful that soon not only girls but also religious of several different congregations were attending the classes which were held after their own school day had ended. It was to this school that Hannah Fitzgerald decided to apply. Accordingly, she went one day to the Ursuline convent at 139 Henry Street, and asked to see the superior. It was one of those moments in the history of souls that are so weighty, so filled with possible alternative outcomes of which the principal actors are ignorant, that in retrospect we can only exclaim, "The finger of God is here!"

Reverend Mother Irene entered the convent parlor, and the two Irish women were face to face. At first sight they seemed to have little in common. Hannah Fitzgerald, the farmer's daughter, was about twenty-four years old. Blue eyed and ruddy, with a round face and an innocent expression, she was taller and of broader build than the nun who looked at her with searching dark eyes. Reverend Mother Irene was about thirty-nine at the time, and had been superior for two years. Delicate looking and reserved, she spoke softly, and her quiet manner sug-

gested at the same time refinement and an atmosphere of prayer. Only her eyes gave a hint of the controlled energy and determination hidden under her gentleness. What she saw in her young compatriot must have pleased her, for the visit ended with the agreement that Hannah should come to live at St. Teresa's, help with some of the teaching, and study to be a public school teacher.

The thought of hard work and long hours of study held no fears for Hannah. On the contrary, she was delighted at the prospect, and gave herself generously to her own study, and to whatever work fell to her share in the classroom with the children. At the same time, and perhaps without realizing it, she began a new study, one that had not been part of her agreement with Reverend Mother Irene. She began to study the nuns. It was her first contact at close range with religious, and their life soon made a profound impression on her. Shortly after she came, the happy young convert, Sister Clement Eggers, pronounced her vows in the little convent chapel, and more than once during her stay there, she saw graduates of the academy enter the cloister as postulants. There were already several among the young professed nuns who had been born and raised in the parish, among them the two Dougherty sisters, and the two Dunleavys, as well as Sister Teresa Maguire and Sister

Paul Packert. There were other sets of sisters too, the Wallaces, Mother Ignatius and Mother Alphonsus, who had been professed the same day, and those two others, most interesting to Hannah because they were Irish born like herself—Reverend Mother Irene and her younger sister Elizabeth, who was now Sister Augustine. Seeing these sisters spending their young religious lives together must have made Hannah think often and wistfully of Minnie, so many hundreds of miles away from her, and in such frail health. Their dream of being together was not being fulfilled very quickly, she would admit to herself, and would resolve to work harder, get a position, and be able to provide better for her beloved little sister. Meanwhile, she thanked God for the loving and kindly cousins who took such devoted care of Minnie.

As Hannah became more and more a part of the family at St. Teresa's, she came to realize that the nuns were beginning to feel the pinch of poverty. The academy and parochial school registration were slowly decreasing. The flood tide of Irish immigration that had caused the tremendous growth of several East Side parishes during the sixties and seventies had ebbed, and St. Teresa's parish was experiencing a gradual change. It was still a quiet residential section displaying for the most part a

peaceful, middle class respectability. Its streets were lined with rows of trim brick homes where many Irish and some German Catholic families shared a closely knit neighborhood and parochial life in a community of interests centered around the church. Pleasures were still simple and usually confined to the immediate neighborhood, except for an occasional all day outing to Harlem River Park.

Lately, however, some of the parishioners had begun to move away, uptown usually, towards Washington Square. At first no one thought anything of it when they were replaced by non-Catholic families. But then another, and another Catholic family moved away, and after a while the Sunday Masses were less crowded than before, and there began to be plenty of room in both the parochial school and in the academy. It became evident that the normal school classes were now the only flourishing part of the nuns' work.

It was a sad experience for them to see their thriving parish life sicken and fade, their once successful academy dwindle away, and to know that there was nothing they could do to save them. It was only about three years since their academy had been approved by New York State, the first Catholic high school to be granted a charter. Seven or eight years before, their graduates had begun taking the Board

of Education's examinations for public school teachers, and passing very creditably. But there was nothing to be done but make a new beginning somewhere else.

By 1896 Reverend Mother Irene had made her decision, and despite their meagre resources she rented a brownstone house on Park Avenue at East 94th Street and opened an academy. A few months later the opportunity came to buy a fine colonial house on the corner of 93rd Street and Park Avenue, and here the academy reopened in September of 1897 with Mother Augustine in charge, and seven or eight other nuns to share the teaching. Hannah Fitzgerald was invited to move with them to 93rd Street and this continued to be her home until 1903.

In May 1898 she passed the Board of Education examinations, but in the meantime, with the consolidation of Brooklyn and New York into "Greater New York," revisions were being made in the laws governing the training of teachers. In June a law was passed requiring attendance at a city training school for all prospective teachers, and the St. Teresa's candidates were all denied licenses. This was a shattering blow to Hannah and to the nuns, for whom the classes were a means of support. After exhausting every avenue of appeal to have the decision reversed, the nuns changed the classes to merely "review

classes" and Hannah Fitzgerald started all over again, this time in the newly organized New York Training School for Teachers. When she finally obtained her license to teach in 1901, she was almost thirty and had been in America fifteen years. Minnie was twenty-seven, in steadily failing health. Except for a few weeks each summer, when Hannah rejoined the family at Baker's Mills, their only contacts had been by mail. But Hannah Fitzgerald's optimism and determination continued to triumph, as they always would, over depressing obstacles, and she started on her career as a public school teacher.

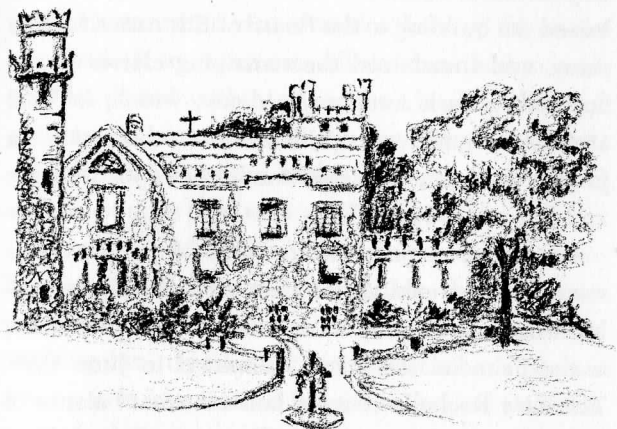
CHAPTER FOUR

"Teaching is a high endeavor if you approach it psychologically as a wonderful opportunity to develop character and personality. Otherwise it is just routine."

MOTHER XAVIER

IN THE MEANTIME that other indomitable Irish woman, Mother Irene, had not been idle. After she had rented the temporary building on 94th Street, she had been advised by Father O'Farrell, the former pastor of St. Teresa's, to open a school in New Rochelle. She had promptly taken steps to this end and by January 1897 had bought Leland Castle, a Gothic Revival structure of grey stone, ornamented with wooden crenelations and boasting two ornate

turrets in the romantic manner. When the nuns bought it, the interior was filled with debris from a



recent fire, and they had to work hard to get it into a habitable condition. On July 2, 1897, Father Thomas McLoughlin, pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church, offered the first Mass there, and classes began in September, with ten boarders and sixty day students. Mother Irene was the principal. The classes grew rapidly and the school was soon firmly established—so firmly, and in so obviously favorable a location, that she decided to make New Rochelle the mother house of their community. By 1902 the Castle was almost twice its original size, with a

southwest wing added first and then a northwest wing three stories high, which included a beautiful chapel. In June 1900 she had closed St. Teresa's high school, leased the building to the Board of Education for five years, and transferred the remaining classes to the flourishing Park Avenue Academy, which, in 1902 and 1903 could report with evident satisfaction, "a prosperous year, with one hundred twenty students and fifteen graduates."

According to present day rates of progress, this seems modest enough. Modest also, almost incredible when one considers the extent of their activities, is the financial statement submitted in June 1899. The New Rochelle convent had a current balance of three thousand, two hundred twenty-four dollars, and a forty-eight thousand, five hundred dollar debt. St. Teresa's had a three hundred seventy dollar balance and a sixteen thousand dollar mortgage. Park Avenue had a three hundred fifty dollar balance and a forty-two thousand dollar debt. All the more admirable, then, seems the charity of the nuns toward Hannah Fitzgerald and many other young women to whom they gave a home or education or a position as the case might be. Apparently, Hannah shared the nuns' poverty which at this period was very real, both at New Rochelle and Park Avenue. Food was plain and not very nourishing. Milk was

scarce, dessert appeared no oftener than once or twice a week, and even then it was of the simplest type, unless friends or relatives happened to send a treat. Even water was almost a luxury, the meter rate made it so expensive. All the nuns had to work very hard, and with Mother Irene leading the way, everyone followed generously. But though the spirits were willing, the poor bodies suffered, and several of the first nuns died very young.

For a little while Hannah's health was not so robust as it had once been. Possibly she had overworked to do her share in helping the nuns, while finishing her requirements for her teacher's license. At any rate, she trained herself to pay no attention to her body's protests. "In the morning when I woke, I wouldn't think about whether I was sick or not; I just got up and kept going. I knew Our Lord would take care of me," she said of this period when she first began teaching. One is reminded of this philosophy by the advice she gave a fearful student once, many years later, when the latter was hesitating to take up her interrupted college career. "How long will it take me to finish?" she asked. "Don't consider how long it will take. Begin!" answered Mother.

Although her career as a public school teacher was to be very brief, it was successful, as in fact was everything she undertook. Inexperienced though

she was, she sensed the needs of her children almost at once, and from her meagre resources provided extra decorations for the classrooms of poorer children, sparing no trouble to give them pleasure. She loved to recall her joy when, after repeated explanations, she saw light dawn in the eyes of a young child. "How wonderful to see the little mind unfold!" she would exclaim. Her balanced appreciation of the essentials in every situation is illustrated by an incident from this period. One day the principal of the school where she was teaching reproached her with the fact that none of her pupils, or at least some of them, did not have the high marks that another teacher's pupils had. Hannah quietly called the principal's attention to the fact that if some of Miss So-and-so's pupils had some very high marks, there were others who had very low ones, whereas her own had a happy medium, in general, neither very high nor very low.

Two years went by quickly, and Hannah at thirty-two was quite accustomed to her teaching position. She was still living at the 93rd Street Academy when the blow fell which, after all, could not have been entirely unexpected. Minnie died in 1903, and it is comforting to think that when the word came, Hannah was with Mother Augustine to whom she was so united in friendship and understanding.

It was Mother Augustine who wrote to her own sister, Mother Irene, when they were both very old, "I love you with all the human love that is left in my heart." It could not have been necessary for such a woman to say much to Hannah now. Her silent sympathy would be enough.

With Minnie's death, Hannah realized that the career she had begun two years before had lost its meaning. While her responsibility for Minnie lasted, no other alternative had even suggested itself to her; and this, too, was typical. She always did one thing at a time, with such absorption that she was literally incapable of being distracted. Innumerable times in later years faculty members were seen to stand waiting beside her desk, almost in front of her, while she continued working, completely unaware of their presence. Her capacity for concentration was matched by her habit of prompt decision and immediate action in affairs of great or minor importance. So she acted according to pattern when, realizing for the first time the possibility that she might be called to the religious life, she promptly entered the Ursuline Order in November 1903 at New Rochelle, a few months after Minnie's death. These were the days before the new code of Canon Law, and there seemed nothing irregular about giving her the religious habit six weeks later, on December thirtieth.

After all, she had lived with the nuns for about eight years and they knew one another very well indeed. Henceforth she would be Sister Xavier, working for nothing less than the glory of God, and comforted in her loss of Minnie by the acquisition of an ever growing family of religious sisters.

September of 1904 found her back again in 93rd Street as a "white veil novice," teaching the children and learning to be a religious at the same time. Those were exciting days for both old nuns and the youngest novices, when each week brought word of Mother Irene's newest venture, the College of St. Angela, which had just opened in Leland Castle. Bits of news drifted down from New Rochelle. There were twelve students, and a beautiful house, Number 9 West Castle Place, had been bought for six thousand dollars to be their dormitory, and it was to be called St. Ursula's Hall.

There were other exciting developments, too. The nuns had joined the newly organized Roman Union, with a Mother General, and different provinces, and changes in their rules, and even in their habit. Almost thirty-five years later Mother Xavier wrote, "I love the Roman Union. I believe that outside the founding of the Order, no single event in its history has been fraught with so great significance." Probably no one valued it more highly than she even from

her first contact with it, for if she so often acted on what seemed to be an impulse, it was usually because she sensed immediately the full import of a thing, and her quick, keen mind jumped ahead to conclusions that others dimly guessed at.

Sister Xavier spent her second year of novitiate at New Rochelle and made her first profession in 1906. After so many years of city life, it was a joy to live among trees and green lawns again. Busy as she was, she would find time to stand and gaze for at least a few minutes at the rambler roses tumbling over the wooden fence along Chestnut Lane, and looking very much like the roses she had left in Ireland. Perhaps as she looked at the barn that once housed Simeon Leland's horses and carriages, she already envisioned the college building that took its place in 1912; and no one would be more interested than she to watch the process of moving Cottage Number 23 several yards down West Castle Place to its new position on the corner, and the erection of the gymnasium where it had formerly stood.

But most of all she was engrossed with her life with God, deepening the foundations of prayer, trying to see God everywhere, and to accept His will in everything, giving herself to obedience, growing in her appreciation of poverty, relishing the hours

of prayer and the recitation of the Office. When she made her final vows in 1909 she was as mature spiritually as she had already shown herself intellectually. A picture taken at this time shows her steady-eyed and serious, but she is remembered as being completely happy too.

CHAPTER FIVE

"We recall with pleasure the happy days spent with you, especially the older girls, when the college was smaller and the personal contact more intimate and informal."

MOTHER XAVIER

THE EARLY DAYS of a college, like those of the young people for whom it exists, are full of promise, more than of fulfillment. There are many weaknesses and gaps to be corrected or filled, but its own youthful daring helps it to survive the crises that threaten it. And because it is young, it has a charm that no later period shares, though the ripe fruitfulness of maturity has a deeper beauty.

In 1910, when Sister Xavier joined the faculty, the College of St. Angela was just six years old. Hardly anything had become a tradition yet, although there was already an impressive list of "firsts." The Sodality of Our Lady had been organized in 1905, and the first issue of the literary magazine, *Quarterly*, had

appeared that spring. 1906 saw the birth of the dramatic society which presented its first midyear play in the Waldorf-Astoria in 1909. The philosophical society, *Alpha-Alpha*, was formed in 1907 under the inspiration of Father Halpin, the beloved chaplain, and the College Advisory Board was organized in 1909. Two years later the name of the college was changed to the College of New Rochelle.

The class of 1911, now "stately seniors," had doubled the student enrollment when they arrived, twenty strong, in September, 1907, and they contributed more than numbers during their stay. They incurred the first "campus" on record, by cutting classes one day to hear Enrico Caruso and Mary Garden sing at the Metropolitan Opera House. As a final flourish, they published the first yearbook, *Annales*, and when it came, overwhelmed by their own achievement, they delivered the copies with fitting solemnity. Packing the books into a pony cart the officers got in, while the rest, carrying candles, escorted them around campus to the different cottages to deliver the yearbooks. It did not take them long, even with lighted candles and a pony cart to manage, for despite the steady increase in numbers, the student population was still only eighty-four.

Nevertheless, Mother Irene and her first associates never hesitated to secure the best teachers for their

small flock. With her proverbial genius for enlisting the help of sympathetic and able advisers, she had managed to gain Conde Pallen, for instance, as both a professor of English and a member of the board of trustees, which listed among other distinguished names those of the Honorable Luke Stapleton, Morgan O'Brien and Bourke Cochrane. Doctor John Greene, also a trustee, was among the first professors, as was Doctor James J. Walsh.

When Sister Xavier began her college teaching, she fitted in modestly, but quite ably, among her more illustrious colleagues. She had spent the previous year beginning her Master's at Columbia University, and teaching in the Seminary, where she also supervised the boarders. Since their classes were held in the new gymnasium building, she had already become a familiar figure to the college girls, whose classes also met there.

It had not taken them long to discover the Irish lilt in her voice, nor had they failed to remark her happy blue eyes, her sudden hearty laugh, and her quick, business-like walk, which discouraged any attempt to engage her in light conversation. She had no time for trivialities at any stage of her career, either in or out of the classroom, they were soon to learn. The impression made on a student a few years later could have been written as truly then:

"Soft spoken, with innocent round face—that was our first impression of Mother Xavier in September, 1915. We soon learned that the innocent look hid a depth of knowledge and understanding. There was no subject of which this soft-spoken nun was ignorant. Her trained mind presented and made clear any point she wished to make.

"She had her class under control at all times. When a brash freshman would try to lengthen discussion to waste time, Mother would put her in her place with a quiet word. And many an errant student saw the change from gentle 'Xave' to a flashing-eyed, firm-mouthed disciplinarian."

But her flashing eyes inevitably grew mild again in a moment, and her Irish wit would flash instead. "Some days she'd sparkle," an alumna recalls. "Whenever she spoke, her eyes would light up and her whole expression change." Unsophisticated and responsive as she was, she was easily embarrassed and blushed often and thoroughly to the delight of her worldly-wise young audience.

One day in a sociology class the topic dealt with romantic love. Mother got deeply involved in the subject matter, hesitated, stopped, blushed deeply, and blurted, "Of course, girls, you understand I know all this from my reading!" Another day she was talking about statistics. Her students were ac-

customed to see her write an occasional sentence on the board in French, an expedient she resorted to because, although she read and wrote the language with some proficiency, her pronunciation was poor. Today, however, she wrote in English, quoting an authority on economics, but covering with her hand the words she was writing. "There are three kinds of lies: lies, *damn* lies and statistics!" She exposed the terrible word, erased it vigorously, before it could do any damage, then, blushing with embarrassment, joined in the roar of laughter that followed.

Obviously, her classes were not dull. Although she was teaching a variety of subjects and finishing her M.A. between times, she conducted each course with a real grasp of the subject. Of her economics class it was said, "You felt she could have been right down in Wall Street selling stocks and bonds, she had such a fine mind for business." Her explanations in mathematics were so clearly given that students normally inclined to fail the subject ended by liking it and being able to understand it. She made sociology a live and stimulating subject—understandably so, for she was warmly interested in humanity, collectively and above all, individually. A born educator, she studied her students almost instinctively as she taught them and without missing anything overlooked a great deal. She treated them as mature even

if they were not, and taught them sometimes, in matters of lesser consequence, by letting them pay the penalty of their own heedlessness. Above all, she loved them, although little inclined to show her affection outwardly, and believed the best of them. This, of course, meant that she was sometimes imposed upon, and apparently hoodwinked. But events later showed that she was far wiser than she seemed. One of her early students relates:

“During the years when we were dayhops we had to travel by trolleycar to reach the college. I lived directly across from Mt. St. Ursula, from which I had graduated. If we didn’t get a certain car we were late for the first period, Mother Xavier’s. After using up our allotted cuts, we threw ourselves on her mercy. Somehow, in making our excuses, we gave the impression that there was a bridge to be crossed, and that this caused our lateness. Mother accepted our story and excused us. It was not until Commencement week that she gently informed us that she went occasionally to Mt. St. Ursula, and could find no sign of a bridge. ‘But trolleys are most unreliable,’ she remarked with a twinkle in her eye, ‘and I am sure you did your best to be on time.’”

Naturally, her influence carried over into the future lives of her students. One says, “From her I learned that if you expect people to do right they

will seldom fail you. I carried this philosophy over to the training of my own children and it has brought wonderful fruit." The same person adds:

"Mother Xavier could always see the good in individuals or in any situation. Once I came to visit her, and I told her that I had married a Presbyterian whose maternal grandfather was a minister. Of course I expected her to be somewhat horrified, but instead she nodded her head and said, 'Very good, Alice, I am sure there is great spirituality in your husband's background. You will, no doubt, have a vocation among your children.' This was a prophecy, as my oldest daughter became a Sister of Charity."

"Mother's memory has always been a blessed one for me," another recalls. "Our last class with her before graduation was a real inspiration bringing tears to some eyes. She, the ideal nun, devoted the period to explaining how important it was to be good wives and mothers; and the recipes she offered for constructive living in the world were as fine as any I have heard since." The regard her students had for her shows through the candid comment of one of the earliest of them, "I found it difficult to put on paper something worthy of my dear friend Mother Xavier. I found it difficult because she seemed to me pure spirit."

CHAPTER SIX

"You must take people as you find them, and not as you would like to have them."

MOTHER XAVIER

LIKE MOST of the nuns in the early years of New Rochelle, when work was heavy and workers few, Mother Xavier was usually holding several positions at once. When Mother Ignatius, who had been registrar, was elected superior in 1915, Mother Xavier was much surprised to find herself appointed to take her place. In this new work she was soon to display a whole array of gifts not yet apparent, and to render an inestimable service in the development of the college. She continued teaching as well, and overburdened as she was, acquired a reputation for absent-mindedness which she never succeeded in losing. It was her own peculiarly lovable brand, made up of a number of elements besides overwork. One was her complete devotion to the important matter at hand. Nothing else was allowed to interfere. If she carried a poker instead of an umbrella from her house to the Castle once on a rainy day, it merely meant that her mind was on Holy Mass, and the poker, with which she had stirred up the fire to keep her girls warm in her cottage, just happened to be in her hand. Another element was the fact that when she taught, she became so engrossed in her

subject that her keen and intense mind often ran ahead of her words, and the sometimes amusing results became bywords to the students who loved her. "Now in night school," she once said precisely in a sociology class, "in night school, classes are held in the evening." One of her associates from this period recalls:

"There are stories that have become classics in her life at the college. Once she read the results of examinations, 'The following young ladies passed.' There followed a list of names. Then Mother put down her rollbook and added with a quiet and final smile, 'All those who did not pass, failed.' The ensuing uproar revealed that Mother had turned two pages at once, omitting the names of many others who had passed."

In matters of lasting importance, however, there was never any sign of absent-mindedness. Those who have watched her close her eyes and proceed to rearrange rapidly a whole program of classes, eliminating conflicts and arriving at a happy solution, all with her eyes still closed, know what her powers of concentration were. They were matched by her amazing memory, which recalled with equal ease faces, names, events, and matters of routine procedure. For many years of her life as registrar, she would interrupt her work each hour to go out

into the hall and ring the bell for the end of the period. As she waited, she would often summon a passing student and remark, "Now, now, Miss —, you failed mathematics last term. You'll have to go to summer school. You've only sixty-six points." She was always right in every detail. An alumna writes:

"I was always surprised, after an absence of some duration, to find that she not only remembered me by name, but that she knew the details of my college career and of my life after college. If I mentioned any of my classmates, she remembered them in the same way. I guess she studied us more than we studied her. We were so self-centered and she was so unselfish."

More than one has had the experience of reminiscing with Mother Xavier about old times, only to discover, when she unluckily turned the conversation to her academic past, that Mother would chuckle pleasantly and exclaim, "Yes, you got a D in that!" And again, she was always right.

Throughout her years as registrar, her fairness and her respect for each individual made students turn to her with confidence in their difficulties. One time a student had aroused the ire of her German teacher by a fit of uncontrollable giggling which disrupted the class, and had been unceremoniously ordered out of the room. She relates:

"After I had come to my senses in the hallway, my best judgment urged me to go to the registrar's office to report my misbehavior. It was a lucky decision. Mother Xavier listened quietly with a serious expression and then remarked, 'I am sure you meant no insolence or disrespect, Helen. I never think of you as that type of student. Sometimes the foreigners on our faculty do not understand the American girl. I am sure that is what happened here.'

" 'What shall I do about it, Mother?' " I asked in contrite tones.

" 'Nothing. Just go back to your German class on Monday as if nothing had happened. In the meantime I shall speak with Fraulein explaining *you* to *her* and putting her mind at ease about your intention. When you have to laugh—you just have to laugh. That's your trouble, is it not?'

"On Monday I entered class in fear and trembling. I was greeted with a broad smile, and was required to recite frequently during that period. Later in the week, Fraulein invited me to join her in one of her famous *kaffee klatsches* in the cosy corner at the end of Maura's second corridor. We became warm personal friends. Thereafter I studied my German more faithfully—all this because Mother Xavier had handled a 'ticklish' situation wisely."

Her kindly sympathy with youth is recalled in an-

other incident from the early years, which pictures her in a rare moment of relaxation:

"Election year brings another memory. We had a straw vote, speeches on the campus, etc. Most of the college had lined up on the Democratic side to hear Woodrow Wilson in the person of one of our popular classmates and a handful of Republicans supported Charles Evans Hughes—*me*, behind the whiskers. I was not discouraged, however, for among the cheering rooters on my side was the smiling face of Mother Xavier. Her presence more than balanced the gathering. With her on my side, I was ready for any mob. Time and maturity make me aware that she knew I'd be the underdog at that assembly. And that's why she wanted to be there. What wonder we all loved her!"

At the same time, she was firmness itself when principles were at stake. An early admirer recalls:

"She was adamant. Ask the class of Nineteen. When they were ill-advised by some impulsive members of Seventeen to 'get back at' the faculty for an imagined slight to their dignity, by calling off the Meet (the Freshman-Sophomore basketball game, always a thrilling event), Mother said, 'Oh, indeed, you won't play? Well, so you won't!' Tears and prayers availed us nothing. There was no meet that year."

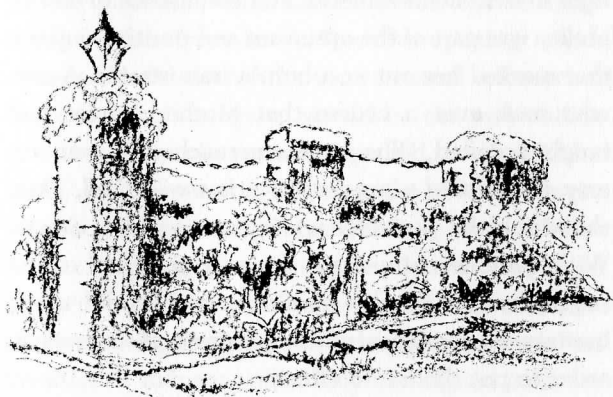
She was equally unyielding when students tried

to evade required courses or demanded changes in examination schedules. Mother was inexorable once her decisions were finally made. Yet she was dearly loved by those who occasionally were almost swept out of her presence by a negative answer, or exasperated by her serene unconcern when they complained that she had scheduled two examinations for the same class on the same day. "Now, now," she would smilingly answer the indignant sophomore, "isn't it nice to get them both over with?"

Mother Xavier continued teaching until 1928. From then on, as full-time registrar, she rarely had informal contact with the students, who, in later years, hardly knew her. The following account represents a fortunate exception:

"I first remember Mother Xavier as she appeared behind the forbidding bars of the registrar's window in Chidwick. On the rare occasions when I had business with her, I approached her office with some trepidation, for her slightly brusque manner of speaking and the dispatch with which she dismissed me were hardly encouraging. I was much astonished, then, to come quite unexpectedly upon Mother Xavier's true self. I was leaving the 'package room' in the Castle one sunny morning in 1929, after getting my mail, and as I strolled idly down the courtyard path, I stopped to admire the old-

fashioned garden. The tulips had come and gone, and in their places stood iris, purple, lavender and tawny brown. Shiny darkleaved myrtle followed the path, and violet leaves remained to tell of the fragrance they had but lately hidden. Just at the entrance to the courtyard, below the heavy weather-beaten brick pier, which, surmounted by a picturesque lamp, gave an air of calm, Victorian security, bloomed a flower that I did not recognize. I stooped to examine its intricate heart-shaped blossom and graceful leaf. A shadow fell across the flower and me. I looked up to see Mother Xavier eyeing me with sympathetic enthusiasm. 'That's bleeding heart,' she informed me, and proceeded to lead me around the courtyard, pointing out her favorites with evident relish. I left enriched with a new friend, with



whom I had many a similar encounter in after years, but who never overawed me again."

If the registrar's window was uninviting to students, the office itself, crowded and ill-furnished though it was, was becoming a favorite haven for young faculty members to whom Mother Xavier was to be an increasingly loved and trusted counsellor and friend. Young men and women, new to college teaching, confided their ambitions and difficulties to her, and received frank and constructive criticism, an occasional reprimand, but always her unfailing support and esteem. To some she gave the timely urging that sent them on to graduate study. To others she gave wise counsel in the problems they encountered in bringing up their children. She was interested in everything they told her and took a personal delight in their achievements. Her confidence in others' ability was part of the optimism and positive outlook that marked her out as a born administrator. A nun who took over a course that Mother Xavier had taught recalled, "She never encroached on our liberty, nor offered a suggestion unless we asked. Then she would be perfectly willing to give her views." With genuine enthusiasm she used to listen to the suggestions of faculty members, and would never hesitate to change a whole program of courses in order to put them into effect.

Almost as soon as she was made registrar, Mother Xavier began her struggle for academic excellence. She searched for good professors, and when she found them, managed to keep them, although their salaries were pitifully low. Raises came infrequently, for the college could seldom afford even a small increase. Devotion to teaching, and the satisfaction of collaborating with a woman who appreciated their contribution must have had something to do with their remaining.

By preference, and also of necessity, she always dealt with the faculty members in an informal way. It was she who interviewed them when they first came. In that one meeting they would agree as to salary, hours of teaching, and scope of subjects. There would be no written contract, and the new faculty member would neither see her nor hear anything further from her before the opening day of college. At the end of the year a casual reference to the next year's program would be the only indication that the professor was expected to return. After some years of service, however, the older professors would each receive a personal note from Mother Xavier, assuring them of tenure. On the other hand, on two or three occasions when faculty members received tempting offers of advancement from universities or industry, after they had signed contracts

with New Rochelle, Mother Xavier never hesitated to release them. "Now, you must think of your family," she would say, "and you will do better there."

A foreign born professor recalls her first meeting with Mother Xavier:

"She showed me the Castle and the chapel; then she suggested that we go to the summer house, as it was more pleasant to talk there. She put me at my ease immediately, and inspired in me a great deal of confidence. She was interested in me, my family and my country, and after a long interview said she had learned a great deal about me. There was no need to wait longer for her decision. I had confided to her my longing to continue my education, and my indecision about becoming an American citizen. Her response decided me. 'For you, America is the place,' and she urged me to become a citizen without delay. She ended by arranging my classes so that I could continue my studies."

Faculty members were quick to assess the keenness of Mother Xavier's mind and the range of her interests, and to make allowances for her lack of experience. Certainly there was much, in the early days, that she did not know about running a college. Each summer, for example, she would have to revise the catalog, always under pressure, and plenty of

errors would creep in. One faculty member patiently explained to her one time that she, personally, didn't mind being listed as a professor one year and an instructor the next, but that it was a little difficult to explain her demotion to her friends! None of the nuns associated with Mother Xavier in the administration knew any more than she did about such fine points, and she had to teach herself. She faithfully read such educational journals as *School and Society*, and spent long hours studying the catalogs of all the leading women's colleges. At the registrars' meetings which she attended frequently, she made fruitful contacts, and many shrewd judgments. A nun who worked with her at that time said once:

"She had a fine faculty for discerning those features which were of value to us. The most enthusiastic praise of procedure in other colleges would leave her completely unmoved. I can still hear her say, 'Yes, that is fine for their situation but it would not fit in with our setup,' or again, 'Yes, that is something we should have, but we are not quite ready for it yet'; or, 'Now, that is something we need, and as soon as I can see my way clear, I am going to organize it.'"

But sometimes it was her native impetuosity that won out, as when she suddenly decided, in 1927, to introduce an honors course for gifted students. With-

out weighing the possibility of complications, she launched the program. For a few weeks uneasy professors met a group of bewildered students and tried to comply with the instructions that neither group quite understood. Mother Xavier soon realized her blunder and presently the honors program quietly dissolved.

One of her earliest projects as registrar was the attempt to have the college accepted by the Association of American Universities. She drew up all the required reports and had a representative come to see the college. The outcome was unfavorable. The library was inadequate, and a new science building was urgently needed. Mother Xavier was quite crushed, but she went to the chapel and in a little while she had recovered her buoyancy. It was the will of God; she accepted the disappointment and began again. "We needed outsiders to come in and point out our defects, and this will benefit us greatly. And now we can see that it is all for the best!" she declared. A few years later in 1925 she was able to show how much she had profited by the experience. Even though the science building was not yet completed, the coveted recognition was won, carrying with it automatic approval by the Middle States Association, of which New Rochelle was a charter member. By 1929, again as a result of Mother

Xavier's efforts, it was also a member of the Association of American University Women.

The expansion of the college during these years was little short of phenomenal. In 1929, its silver jubilee year, the freshman class numbered 235. Art and home economics departments were introduced, and additional courses were offered in sociology and journalism. By 1931, with a student body of 800, it was the largest Catholic women's college in the United States. Doctor Irene Wightwick became full-time Vocational Director in 1932, and nine new faculty members brought the total to seventy-five. It is safe to say that Mother Xavier was the instigator of every forward step that was made, but it is also true that when something needed to be undone, she was the first to suggest it. Thus, after working tirelessly to organize the home economics department, she realized that the college could not meet the financial demands for its expansion at a time when a new college library was imperative. Rather than have an inferior department, she advocated the suppression of the home economics program, after ascertaining that all the New Rochelle students would be accepted in other colleges with similar programs.

With equal concern, she looked after the interests of individual faculty members, and never hesitated

to tell them unpleasant truths if she knew they would benefit in the end. One earnest and sincere young instructor was at first deeply pained when she sent for him, and after telling him all his fine personal qualities, said firmly, "Now, I believe that you are in the wrong place. I think you would do better in industry." He took her advice, nevertheless, and as a successful business man has been deeply grateful that Mother Xavier advised him as she did.

It may seem surprising that a woman of such broad intellectual vision should be interested in the material aspects of planning too. But Mother Xavier found a creative challenge in everything connected with her life work. For instance, she loved to draw plans for new buildings and additions to existing ones and said that if she had been a man she would have been a builder. Her training school course in mechanical drawing had been her only preparation, but her scale drawings were quite professional looking, and what was more important, the ideas they embodied were practical and good. She planned the additions that were incorporated into the present science building during the thirties. Probably no one knows how many sets of plans she worked on and presented to superiors who could not see their way to use them, and would reject them. Nothing daunted, and not the least offended, she would be back a

few days later with a new set of plans and the same amount of enthusiasm. If in the end her ideas were rejected and someone else's accepted, she was the first to support the decision and to admit, provided she could do so honestly, that it was a better solution than her own.

It would, of course, be untrue to Mother's memory, and to the transparent honesty that always marked her dealings with everyone, to depict her as if she had no human weaknesses. Those who knew her well and who revere her memory think that they were few. She could be stubborn and abrupt, and when she was overworked she had a very quick temper. Most faculty members, especially the nuns, had some experience of it at one time or another. But if they left her office smarting under the sting of a brusque dismissal, usually it was not long before they were the recipients of an humble apology that would heal any wound. A young nun accosted her one day to ask for a change in schedule that seemed warranted to her, but not to Mother Xavier, who was probably right, and who gave her short shrift. The next day the nun received a note in Mother Xavier's almost illegible handwriting, informing her that all the changes had been made, and all the professors involved had been notified. The note concluded, "I am sorry I was so cross yesterday afternoon. I shall

try to do better hereafter." The promptness of her apology is more easily understood in the light of a comment she once made, "When things go wrong and I have difficulties with someone, I think of her as a 'soul whom Jesus loves.'"

Her failing health had much to do with her temper. The youth and inexperience of some of the faculty, whether nuns or lay members, were also a trial to her on occasion. Dr. Wightwick, who sometimes got the brunt of Mother's wrath, remembers with amusement the day she flared at her, "Now, now, I *do* have to put up with the nuns, but not with you!"

Probably if she had had more help with her work, her temper might have been more easily controlled. But as so often happens with people who do not complain, superiors seem not to have realized how burdened she was. She sometimes had an assistant for a little while, only to have her taken away for some other work after spending precious time explaining the office routines to her. Although more assistants gradually came, the office was always understaffed as long as she was there. She used to work even on Christmas day, trying to catch up. In the light of such circumstances it is revealing to learn that she once advised a young nun, "Never make a comparison. You'll lose your peace of soul."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"May the rays from the divine heart of Jesus illumine your pathway until you reach the golden door of the endless Day."

MOTHER XAVIER

MOTHER XAVIER's human weaknesses were balanced by many obvious virtues. Humility, obedience, kindness, poverty and prayerfulness were equally apparent in her, and each was exemplified in a variety of ways. If she was humble enough to apologize to the youngest faculty member, it was probably her humility also that made her laugh so readily at her own mistakes and absent-mindedness. No one enjoyed a joke or a funny situation more than she, even when she was the object of it. Once when an alumna's child visited campus and exclaimed on seeing Mother Xavier, "Oh, Momma, look at the clown!" she laughed heartily at the mother's embarrassment and answered, "Sure, and you called us much worse things yourself when you were in college!" Her other qualities were humble as well. The gentle courtesy with which she acknowledged a service, the gratitude she showed for any kindness, the instant obedience she gave her superiors, were all manifestations of a genuine humility that was one of her most attractive qualities.

"When Father John Quinn first came," a nun re-

calls, "the dining hall was in progress and the noise of construction made it difficult for those whose classes were on the Castle Place side of Chidwick. Reverend Mother had sent me to ask Father some questions and at the end to ask if there was anything he needed. Father explained that because of his throat trouble, he was having difficulty being heard, and he wondered whether there was any possibility of a change of classes. It was all very casual and very tentative, and Reverend Mother accepted it that way. She told me to ask Mother Xavier, but to explain that it was not a *must*. Mother's reaction was typical. Indeed, everyone was having trouble at the time, and if all the classes were changed for each one who complained, *et cetera*. . . . I assured her that there was no need for any changes; it was just in case a room was available. This took place at about twenty minutes before noon on Sunday. As we filed out of the refectory after dinner, Mother Xavier was waiting there, and asked to see me. I followed her over to the end of the hall and as she turned around to talk to me, I saw that her eyes were filled with tears. 'I beg your pardon for the disedification I have given you by my disobedience, Sister,' she said. 'I have arranged to change Father's classes.'"

Sometimes a Superior would say to someone, "Tell Mother Xavier I'd like to see her when it's con-

venient." No matter what Mother Xavier was doing when the message came, she would stop instantly and start for the Castle. Her spirit of faith in the authority of a superior was coupled with a respectful love and concern which would make her prompt to suggest, with great deference, a course of action calculated to prevent the superior from suffering any embarrassment. "I don't want her to make any mistakes—I'll warn her," Mother Xavier would decide simply. So great was the regard in which she was held that her advice was followed more often than not. Yet she somehow managed to stay in the background. She was always present when work was to be done, but never in view when the fruits were to be enjoyed. Not that she felt overlooked—she simply never gave herself a thought. She had so forgotten herself, out of love for God, that she was oblivious to her own comfort or convenience. She noticed neither heat nor cold, nor bothered to seek relief from pain. Hardly anyone knew that she had a misplaced bone in her foot which caused her constant discomfort. She never did anything to remedy it.

Her affections were treated as ruthlessly as her body. When one of her cousins attended college, she noticed that Mother Xavier never would turn the conversation to ask news of her relatives. But she was obviously delighted to hear about them when-

ever the subject came up. Once when she was shown a picture of the house where she had first lived in northern New York, she took it eagerly, then quickly put it down without looking at it.

But if she sought to mortify herself, she dearly loved to show kindness to others. A nun who was her assistant remembers the day that Mother Xavier, who needed something typed at once, did the whole thing herself with two fingers rather than take her away from the community recreation. Once a postulant who helped in Mother's office admitted that she had a great longing for a Hershey bar. That afternoon she found one on her desk. "Now, now," explained Mother Xavier, "Reverend Mother gave me a small sum of money for emergencies, and this was an emergency." When the young nuns were at recreation near her, no amount of hilarity could disturb her. "I love to hear you having a good time," she would assure them if they apologized for a noisy outburst. She loved their company, which she particularly enjoyed whenever she went to the summer place at Walden, New York. One day when she was there, a group planned a picnic in a field not far from the house. At noon time they all set out, well provided with packed lunches and the wherewithal for games. As they were leaving, someone saw Mother Xavier standing at the screen door watching

them go. "Do you want to come, Mother?" she asked. "Now, you're all ready, and you wouldn't have enough," she answered in a tone that called for a repeated invitation. Sure enough, with a very little urging she came along and was the gayest one in the group, although she was probably twenty years older than anyone there.

Walden was always a delight to her. The quiet beauty of the country, the antics of squirrels and chipmunks and the songs of birds rested and refreshed her spirit. It was relatively easy there, away from the stress of college administration, to engage her in conversation, and occasionally, although she was usually reticent, she would share her most intimate thoughts if she sensed that they would help another. A nun who sought her counsel in a family trial kept these notes of a conversation with her:

"Tribulations are a sign of predilection. Otherwise we would just be children. But sorrows and trials force us to make acts of faith and love and confidence. They exercise us spiritually and make us develop. They make us go to God because He's the only One Who can help us. So it is all very consoling!

"Sometimes I ask for fellowship in His sufferings. Why shouldn't I? And I may not look it, but I have plenty of them. We all have something in us that

drags us down. But if we accept it, we usually get relief. And if we don't—if it continues—we can offer it to God in union with the intentions Our Lord had on Calvary. His intentions were perfect.

"All things work together unto good to those that love God. It's well to remember that. But sometimes we may wonder whether we *do* love Him. Then I just ask that I may love God above all things, for His own sake, and my neighbor as myself. Our Lord said, 'Ask and you shall receive'—just that—not, if you are good—but just, ask and you shall receive."

Mother Xavier's practice of poverty is a legend among the nuns in her community. It was common knowledge that she could move all her belongings in a pillowcase. She made it a rule to keep nothing superfluous, and to get along with what she had. If someone tried to give her a new veil, she would thank her very graciously and say she didn't need it; the one she had was good enough and would last some time yet. Once a nun suggested that she ask for a pen to replace her leaky one, remarking that since it was Christmas time there were probably several good ones she might choose from. Again she refused, very graciously, explaining that the one she had served her purpose very well. She only used a pen when in the office, and it didn't matter that she had to dip it into the bottle. It was the same with her desk.

Many well known and important people came to her office, but no amount of persuasion could induce Mother to part with her ancient rolltop desk. Her assistant succeeded in getting her to keep a more respectable looking one only by convincing her that it would be better to have it used than to keep it in storage.

When it concerned office equipment that contributed to the more efficient running of the college, however, it was a totally different matter. She saw to it that typewriters, mimeograph machines and all office equipment were up-to-date and in good condition. It was an interesting facet of her personality that her respect for authority extended even to that of the manufacturers of machinery. She is remembered as having thrown out several new cans of mimeograph ink because they were not the kind called for in the directions.

Her silver jubilee took place in 1931. As is the custom, she received such presents as rosaries, medals and some books, including a much needed new missal. Some time later someone discovered that she had sent everything, unopened, to a nun on an Indian mission, who, according to Mother Xavier, could make much better use of them than she could. Her only other remembrance of the event was a lunette, given by the faculty members, who loved

and admired her. This she accepted for the chapel.

Several years later her cousin, then a college student, asked a nun what she could give Mother for Christmas. The nun assured her that Mother Xavier needed bedroom slippers very badly, but that they would have to be threadbare before she would ask for new ones. "When I graduated," her cousin remembers, "I had a maple easy chair and lamp which I thought she might be able to use as she was sometimes confined to her room. She thought that would be lovely but, 'First, I must consult with Reverend Mother.' One Christmas we gave her a handmade shawl and she said she never thought she would own anything like that."

A few months before her death she offered to a nun who was ill the room she had occupied for twenty years. A year or so before she had done the same for another, telling the superior she would be happy to move out, and that her bright, sunny room would be more cheerful for the sick nun and more convenient for the visit of the priest. When thanked by the patient she answered, "You're young, and it's important for you to get well. It doesn't matter about me."

The detachment that she practiced with such perfection, and with the ease that comes with habit, was only a preparation for the final stripping, that was

to give her the "fellowship in Christ's sufferings" that she had dared to ask. In 1936, under the burden of overwork, Mother Xavier's health gave way and she suffered a physical collapse from which she was never to recover fully. For the last fifteen years of her life she was unable to recite the Office or to read anything requiring continual concentration. Stripped of the usual means of feeding her soul life, she learned—probably she had already learned it long before—to live simply in God, trusting as a child. Once in an unguarded moment she confided to a young nun who sought an encouraging counsel, "Often after Holy Communion I used to say, 'May I stay with You today as a helpless child' and then I would picture Our Lord carrying His Cross and myself holding on to His robe." To another she remarked one time that she had read the Bible through three times in the course of her life, and remembered a great deal that served her life of prayer.

From a routine of almost incessant activity she now conformed, with the simplicity and objectivity so typical of her, to a program of rest and quiet that were completely new to her. For hours at a time, in summer and winter, she would sit in the nuns' garden, motionless, renewing her physical strength while her busy mind continued to work out schedules and long-range programs without benefit of pen-

cil or paper. On spring days she would enjoy her friends, the birds, watching them build their nests near her. Sometimes she would be seen scaring off marauding cats, scolding them with a few vigorous words as she threatened them with her long leather cincture. One of the nuns recalls:

“One day I had been reading Evelyn Underhill’s poem, ‘Immanence.’ I saw Mother Xavier sitting in her usual retreat, and knowing she would like it, I went out to share the poem with her. She welcomed me with a smile, and I read it to her. When I came to the lines:

*On every nest
Where feathery Patience is content to brood
And leaves her pleasure for the high emprise
Of motherhood—
There doth My Godhead rest,*

I saw that her eyes were filled with tears. Then she began to tell me about her memories of her walks through the fields in Ireland, with the larks starting up from the long grass before her, singing as they flew aloft.”

So she became a familiar figure to the nuns who were hurrying by to class or to chapel, and their affectionate regard became more admiring as weeks and months went by, and Mother Xavier patiently followed her routine of rest.

When the weather was cold she had to make several trips to her outdoor chair, carrying blankets and a pillow. Passing nuns would always try to take them for her, but were invariably put off with a gracious, "No thank you, I can manage."

After a year had passed, she was able to return to the office for a short time every day. Soon she was deep in work again, planning for the future. Then, in 1938, Mother Augustine, her dearest friend and inspiration for so many years, died. On the day of her funeral a nun who was hurrying to join those gathered at the front door of the Castle to watch the cortege leave, came upon Mother Xavier, alone, in a downstairs passageway. In response to her questioning glance, Mother Xavier, as if in self defense, said simply, "I couldn't bear to see her leave the house." If some of her spirit died then, she gave no outward sign. There were to be twelve more years of labor yet, before her work was done. They were not to be spectacular in outward achievement, but were spent in strengthening the gains already made and in training those who would take her place. "It's a poor organization," she once remarked, "that can't provide a substitute."

During most of the preceding years it had been common practice in many eastern colleges for the registrars to carry most of the academic responsi-

bility. Mother Xavier now worked out a plan for the division of authority, and turned over to the dean's office much of the work she had formerly done, characteristically sending along two of her assistants to help in the transition, and leaving her own office understaffed. Mother Thomas Aquinas, who was appointed dean in 1939, concerned herself with the faculty, and Mother Dorothea, her assistant, took over the work connected with the program. Thus Mother Xavier quietly carried out her work of organization by making herself dispensable.

Before her illness she had succeeded in attaining most of the goals she had set for the improvement of the college. The lay faculty had been recruited from outstanding universities. The nuns had been sent for graduate study, and several had already obtained their doctorates.

The college had an A rating from the Board of Education of New York State. She could begin to think of laying down her burden. Her health was declining steadily. Her temper became unpredictable. Faculty members with requests or problems would whisper to her secretary, "Is it a good time?" before approaching her, and were sometimes glad to leave their requests with her assistants, after she had left for the day. But there was no diminution of their affection and admiration. Their relationships

of mutual trust and real friendship had continued to deepen with the passing years. They loved to linger for a friendly chat whenever she was so disposed, and considered it an honor when, on rare occasions, she invited them to come into the office and sit down. Sometimes a group would come to tell of a faculty party, and she would listen to every detail, ask what the women had worn, and laugh heartily at the description of the entertainment provided. Her wit suffered no decline with the years, and one procrastinating professor still quotes the telegram he received from her one July, "Please return your grades at your earliest convenience."

In 1949 the plan for the reorganization of the college administration was brought to a conclusion when Monsignor Francis Walsh, the honorary president, suggested the appointment of a nun instead, who could combine in her person both the name and the authority of the office. Mother Dorothea then became the first woman president, and Mother Xavier confided to someone not long afterwards, "I think when I die I'll go suddenly, but not just yet, because Mother Dorothea still needs me." When the day of her death did come, on April 27, 1950, she left her affairs in perfect order. She had just finished a big piece of work, a survey of the college, which she had brought up to date that morning. Although she was

working against time, she did not hesitate to stop in the midst of her statistics to straighten out a student's program, giving it her entire absorbed attention until the best solution was reached. It was fitting that she should thus end, as she had begun her career, helping a young girl to find truth.

She started to leave the office. It was already noon; she had stayed longer than usual. But she came back for a moment to say to her secretary, "Thank you, Lura, for everything." She walked to the Castle, pausing to smile and say a gracious "Thank you" to a young sister who held the door for her. After lunch she went to rest and at about two o'clock she knocked at another nun's door and asked her to report that she was ill. To the doctor and the priest who were summoned, her quiet reply was the same, "I'm ready to go." She calmly sat in her chair while she was anointed, and sweetly and graciously thanked each one. Obedient, as usual, she permitted herself to be taken to the hospital for oxygen. There, in a final act of detachment, she died that same evening, with none of her dear ones near, away from everything she loved. Just as her work for the student that morning had seemed a symbol of her active life, so her lonely death was an image of her interior life, stripped and surrendered to God.

The next morning the students were amazed to

see, in almost every class, their shocked and sorrowing teachers pouring out spontaneous tributes of loving admiration for this quiet, self-effacing nun who had so won their affection and loyalty, and who had slipped away from them, dying, as she had lived, without giving trouble to anyone.

On Saturday morning, April 29, there gathered in the college chapel students, alumnae, faculty, nuns and priests to celebrate her requiem Mass. It was dignified and solemn, but in a sense, it was triumphant. The chapel bell tolled and there were few dry eyes in the congregation when the Mass was ended, but there was also a sense of exaltation in the hearts of those who listened to the words of the "*In Paradisum*" being sung over and over as the long line filed past the coffin. Alumnae and students, some of them mothers and daughters, faculty members and nuns, —all those present seemed a living witness to Mother's life, bearing testimony to her work—for all the generations she had influenced were represented there, and though all felt a sense of personal loss, they all rejoiced in her triumph. A student who was present exclaimed afterwards, "I have never seen a wedding that was more beautiful!"

